

ROLL CALL

Historian Takes a Working Spring Break

By Bree Hocking

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For Deputy House Historian Fred Beuttler, the highlight of a recent trip to the British Parliament came when he was standing in the Victoria Tower and came face-to-face with one of the precipitating factors of the American Revolution.

“I actually touched the original Stamp Act,” said Beuttler, referring to the 1765 law (hand-written on a 100-foot scroll of vellum and off-limits to the public) that imposed a tax on printed paper in the American colonies. “That was awesome.”

Beuttler was in London last week to present a paper at an academic conference of historians, but while there he met with officials both in and out of Parliament whose work somewhat parallels his own.

Parliament has no official historians, Beuttler said, but the History of Parliament Trust, a private foundation largely publicly funded, produces biographical histories of Parliament though it does not include a public or press outreach component as do the U.S. House and Senate’s historical offices. “It’s a huge operation with 28 staff people and about 20 historians,” Beuttler noted of the trust, comparing it to the small, four-person House Historian’s office, which produces oral and committee histories among its other responsibilities.

Beuttler said he hoped the House Historian’s office eventually could begin writing more extensive Member biographies (similar to what the trust does) to supplement the more bare-boned Congressional Biographical Directory, which (on the House side) is put together by the Office of History and Preservation, a separate office with a more internal chronicling and archival role.

While in London, Beuttler, who paid for the trip out of his own pocket, toured Parliament and met with the clerks of the House of Commons, the Journals and Records. He also addressed a group of about 50 House of Commons staffers on the topic of “U.S. House of Representatives Procedures and Practices,” during which he outlined “parallels and contrasts” between the U.S. and British systems.

Both the U.S. House and the House of Commons, for instance, have a Speaker and a mace, he said. There’s also some aesthetic similarities between Congress and Parliament. “Where the Queen sits in the House of Lords she can look straight to the Speakers’s chair

in the House of Commons,” he said. Likewise, “if you open all the doors in the Capitol, the Speaker could see into the Senate chamber.”

And, Beuttler added, both the Capitol and Parliament buildings sport Minton tiles. “The pattern is very, very close,” he said.

On the differences side of the ledger, Beuttler noted, “they don’t have separation of powers ... whatever Parliament says is constitutional” is. Moreover, legislation mainly comes out of government ministries, not parliamentary committees, which are mostly set up as select panels, he said. Individual members rarely introduce legislation and must first have the permission of their party. All in all, roughly 400 bills — all final acts of Parliament are still printed on sheepskin and bound with red ribbon — are introduced each year. “The staff almost went nuts when I said we got about 9,000 bills submitted per Congress. ... Everyone’s eyes bugged out,” he said.

Beuttler said given the many compelling Revolutionary-era artifacts he’d seen on his trip, “it would be very interesting to collaborate with the archivists [and] historians there to develop a comparative and collaborative exhibit of parliamentary documents, relating to the American founding.”

Moreover, he and Paul Seaward, who heads the trust, discussed the possibility of launching a joint conference on comparative parliamentary history. “Hopefully it was the first of a number of visits back and forth,” Beuttler said.